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Editorial

Developing Materials and Choosing Media

Paul KAWACHI, Ramesh C SHARMA, & Sanjaya MISHRA
Editor@AsianJDE.org

Developing materials and choosing the most appropriate media are constant concerns in open and distance education. These are all the more important in Asia, where so much is borrowed from the West. Not only the various learning technologies, but often whole courses are imported. If there are differences between the European/American student and the Asian student, then these differences may be accentuated when experienced online. However, many studies now show that individual differences likely influence learning much more than cultural differences.

Nevertheless some cultural differences do seem to be important especially for students new to online learning, and for adults engaging foundational courses online. For these two groups of learners in Asia, the independence given to online students and the responsibility given to them over their own learning are matters of concern. Students in Asia are generally accustomed to teacher authority, and some students here would welcome more dialogue with their teacher – as reported for instance by Alias and Jamaludin in this issue.

In choice of media, some media can help increase the interactivity among the teacher and learners. This may at first seem highly desirable, yet with hundreds of thousands of students, the more that the teacher is involved here in the interactions to and from the students, then the higher the cost will become. Shifting the responsibility for learning and developing materials which emphasize interactivity among the students are necessary factors to keep down the costs and so maintain open and distance education in Asia.

In contrast to post-foundational courses for small groups studying with new learning technologies, basic foundational courses for huge numbers of students must choose media which take a cost-effective learner-centered approach, despite students wanting more teacher interaction. There is some tension here therefore between the wants of the Asian student and the development of suitable materials and appropriate media. Part one of this volume 3 looked at the learning styles and wants of students in Asia. This second part looks beyond the learners - to look at developing the learning materials and media employed. The papers in parts one and two of this volume extend our own interests in how multimedia can be used effectively in education and training across cultures (for example, see Mishra & Sharma, 2005).

In the previous part, the authors re-examined the learning interactions between the teacher and student, and between the student and technology, and re-iterated the need for the teacher to accommodate different learning styles and to help students become acculturated to learning at a distance and learning using the various new technologies.

In this second part, various issues and aspects of materials design are raised. Ariadurai et al. for instance point out that the institution could do more to help the teachers to develop their distance-learning material. If each teacher is required to develop his or her own online course, as is now commonly the case, without adequate team input, then such online material may be difficult for other teachers to use. Revising and updating the course may be done ad hoc by the course-tutor, but materials online need to have revisions uploaded regularly. They point out that expert teachers and new teachers could all benefit from working together in a small team. A small team tasked with materials development and revision could free up expert faculty time for teaching as well as help new faculty learn how to develop materials and how to teach online. Teachers – particularly those who may be new to online teaching – may be faced with developing their own materials when all they are accustomed to is the occasional video-camera recording them in a traditional lecture presentation. Teachers worldwide may tend to add multimode novelty to their own online presentations, often worrying how they present themselves on screen to the students. Without the convivial atmosphere and instantaneous feedback, the teacher online must make different efforts to establish a tutor presence and rapport with the students learning.

Several studies now show that too many sensory modes – such as audio plus text plus graphics – are distracting and overloading for the students (Beccue & Vila, 2001 ; Doolittle, 2001 ; Kawachi, 2004 ; Najjar, 1995), and in this volume the paper by Pathak and Chaudhari reports that students indeed preferred only audio and text, and did not rate the teacher's gestures on the side to be so important. When making materials, the teacher may be overly self-conscious about his or her own facial or body gestures, and perhaps our energies and worries could be better focused on the other aspects of the material such as the quality of audio/voice and text. Pathak and Chaudhari bring some reassurance therefore to teachers trying to develop their own materials. In what may be an original idea for small-team development of courses, Pathak and Chaudhari go a little further than might be expected and propose that teachers collaborate with the students themselves to produce more effective their e-lectures.

In the following paper, Wang (extending the topic of the first part and learning styles) reports that some courses were rated poorly since the design was content-based and were assessment-oriented. This is a continuing problem particularly in foundational courses tryingto impart a large amount of material within a short time. In her paper, Wang also reported the contrast that Chinese adult students experienced between learning in China and learning in the West, though the class sizes may have been different and the levels were different – undergraduate foundation courses in China contrasting with graduate level courses in the West. Open and distance teachers widely recognize the need to nurture student autonomy especially in adult education. However there seems to be some potential for a clash in styles when adults are taking an undergraduate foundation course. We note that even in China, Wang found that some courses were learner-centred and these were received well by the Chinese students. Her paper leads into the next paper written by Bright and Yang who highlight the differences between learner-centred courses in the West and teacher-centred courses in the East. They suggest a compromise of collaboration between institutions to bridge the perceived gap in materials approach. In this sense, a small team approach to designing materials would bring in experts from a broad cultural range to achieve a global perspective.

Thus in this issue, a small-team model is advocated – some authors recommend the team be comprised of expert teachers as well as novice teachers, and the above paper by Larry Bright of South Dakota and Jack Fei Yang of Tainan Taiwan suggest teachers collaborate across cultures, while Pathak and Chaudhari in Singapore propose that the students themselves be given a voice.

The following paper looks at the situation in Jordan - a country that could be considered as between Asia and Europe. In this paper, Al-Shalabi and Al-Jufout describe how they have adopted the most recent new technologies in Jordan. Moreover, their work shows how learning technologies designed for online use can improve the learning environment for students in face-to-face mode and thus cater to different learning styles for those who prefer to review the lectures online in their freetime, and all this promotes learner autonomy. The technology they present transfers the conventional lecture using a whiteboard in a classroom directly to the online media. In such technology, the teacher's social presence likely carries through the media to the students viewing the presentation at a distance. Finding enough freetime at home however remains difficult. Alias and Jamaludin report that in Malaysia, their students can use the newest learning technologies, but when having to work full-time during the day to earn a living, it is difficult to squeeze in their late-at-night study time. This means that the promise of learning at your own pace is still out-of-reach for many open and distance students. They report that students new to distance learning still cling to cultural ways of learning in wanting more teacher support. When it comes to engineering and other practical sciences, there is a need to provide somehow the laboratory skills training. Teaching support would seem indispensable in science laboratory work, but this is expensive and real laboratories can also have safety concerns. In the next paper also from Malaysia, Muthusamy et al. look at how virtual laboratories are needed in engineering. This paper does not focus on Malaysia, and it will be interesting to see in the near future how students perceptions of virtual laboratories will vary between East and West.

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Paul KAWACHI, EdD, MA ODE
Kawachi@AsianJDE.org

Ramesh C SHARMA, PhD
Sharma@AsianJDE.org

Sanjaya MISHRA, PhD
SMishra@AsianJDE.org